

2. THE HAPPY PRINCE

High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince. He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt.

He was very much admired indeed. "He is as beautiful as a weathercock," remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes; "only not quite so useful," he added, fearing lest people should think him unpractical, which he really was not.ⁱ [end of 3]

"Why can't you be like the Happy Prince?" asked a sensible mother of her little boy who was crying for the moon. "The Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything."

"I am glad there is some one in the world who is quite happy," muttered a disappointed man as he gazed at the wonderful statue.

"He looks just like an angel," said the Charity Children as they came out of the cathedral in their bright scarlet cloaks and their clean white pinafores.ⁱⁱ

"How do you know?" said the Mathematical Master, "you have never seen one."

"Ah! but we have, in our dreams," answered the children; and the Mathematical Master frowned and looked very severe, for he did not approve of children dreaming.ⁱⁱⁱ

One night there flew over the city a little Swallow.^{iv} His friends had gone away to Egypt six weeks before, but he had stayed behind, for he was in love with the most [end of 4] beautiful Reed. He had met her early in the spring as he was flying down the river after a big yellow moth, and had been so attracted by her slender waist that he had stopped to talk to her.

"Shall I love you?" said the Swallow, who liked to come to the point at once, and the Reed made him a low bow. So he flew round and round her, touching the water with his wings, and making silver ripples. This was his courtship, and it lasted all through the summer.^v

"It is a ridiculous attachment," twittered the other Swallows; "she has no money, and far too many relations"; and indeed the river was quite full of Reeds. Then, when the autumn came they all flew away.

After they had gone he felt lonely, and began to tire of his lady-love. "She has no conversation," he said, "and I am afraid that she is a coquette, for she is always flirting with the wind." And certainly, whenever the [end of 5] wind blew, the Reed made the most graceful curtseys. "I admit that she is domestic," he continued, "but I love travelling, and my wife, consequently, should love travelling also."^{vi}

"Will you come away with me?" he said finally to her; but the Reed shook her head, she was so attached to her home.

"You have been trifling with me," he cried. "I am off to the Pyramids. Good-bye!" and he flew away.

All day long he flew, and at night-time he arrived at the city. "Where shall I put up?" he said; "I hope the town has made preparations."

Then he saw the statue on the tall column.

"I will put up there," he cried; "it is a fine position, with plenty of fresh air." So he alighted just between the feet of the Happy Prince.

"I have a golden bedroom,"^{vii} he said softly to himself as he looked round, and he pre-[end of 6]pared to go to sleep; but just as he was putting his head under his wing a large drop of water fell on him. "What a curious thing!" he cried; "there is not a single cloud in the sky, the stars are quite clear and bright, and yet it is raining. The climate in the north of Europe is really dreadful. The Reed used to like the rain, but that was merely her selfishness."^{viii}

Then another drop fell.

"What is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?" he said; "I must look for a good chimney-pot," and he determined to fly away.

But before he had opened his wings, a third drop fell, and he looked up, and saw--Ah! what did he see?

The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little Swallow was filled with pity. [end of 7]

"Who are you?" he said.

"I am the Happy Prince."

"Why are you weeping then?" asked the Swallow; "you have quite drenched me."

"When I was alive and had a human heart," answered the statue, "I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci,^{ix} where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall,^x but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up

here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep."^{xi}

"What! is he not solid gold?" said the [end of 8] Swallow to himself. He was too polite to make any personal remarks out loud.

"Far away," continued the statue in a low musical voice, "far away in a little street there is a poor house. One of the windows is open, and through it I can see a woman seated at a table. Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress.^{xii} She is embroidering passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honour to wear at the next Court-ball. In a bed in the corner of the room her little boy is lying ill. He has a fever, and is asking for oranges. His mother has nothing to give him but river water, so he is crying. Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, will you not bring her the ruby out of my sword-hilt? My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move."

"I am waited for in Egypt," said the Swallow. "My friends are flying up and [end of 9] down the Nile, and talking to the large lotus- flowers. Soon they will go to sleep in the tomb of the great King. The King is there himself in his painted coffin. He is wrapped in yellow linen, and embalmed with spices. Round his neck is a chain of pale green jade, and his hands are like withered leaves."^{xiii}

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "will you not stay with me for one night, and be my messenger? The boy is so thirsty, and the mother so sad."

"I don't think I like boys," answered the Swallow. "Last summer, when I was staying on the river, there were two rude boys, the miller's sons,^{xiv} who were always throwing stones at me. They never hit me, of course; we swallows fly far too well for that, and besides, I come of a family famous for its agility; but still, it was a mark of disrespect."

But the Happy Prince looked so sad that the little Swallow was sorry. "It is very [end of 10] cold here," he said; "but I will stay with you for one night, and be your messenger."

"Thank you, little Swallow," said the Prince.

So the Swallow picked out the great ruby from the Prince's sword, and flew away with it in his beak over the roofs of the town.

He passed by the cathedral tower, where the white marble angels were sculptured. He passed by the palace and heard the sound of dancing. A beautiful girl came out on the balcony with her lover. "How wonderful the stars are," he said to her, "and how wonderful is the power of love!"

"I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State-ball," she answered; "I have ordered passion-flowers to be embroidered on it; but the seamstresses are so lazy."^{xv}

He passed over the river, and saw the lanterns hanging to the masts of the ships. He passed over the Ghetto,^{xvi} and saw the old Jews bargaining with each other, and weighing out money in copper scales. At last he [end of 11] came to the poor house and looked in. The boy was tossing feverishly on his bed, and the mother had fallen asleep, she was so tired. In he hopped, and laid the great ruby on the table beside the woman's thimble. Then he flew gently round the bed, fanning the boy's forehead with his wings. "How cool I feel," said the boy, "I must be getting better"; and he sank into a delicious slumber.

Then the Swallow flew back to the Happy Prince, and told him what he had done. "It is curious," he remarked, "but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold."

"That is because you have done a good action," said the Prince. And the little Swallow began to think, and then he fell asleep. Thinking always made him sleepy.

When day broke he flew down to the river and had a bath. "What a remarkable phenomenon," said the Professor of Ornithology as he was passing over the bridge. "A swallow in winter!" And he wrote a long [end of 12] letter about it to the local newspaper. Every one quoted it, it was full of so many words that they could not understand.

"To-night I go to Egypt," said the Swallow, and he was in high spirits at the prospect. He visited all the public monuments, and sat a long time on top of the church steeple. Wherever he went the Sparrows chattered, and said to each other, "What a distinguished stranger!" so he enjoyed himself very much.

When the moon rose he flew back to the Happy Prince. "Have you any commissions for Egypt?" he cried; "I am just starting."

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "will you not stay with me one night longer?"

"I am waited for in Egypt," answered the Swallow. "To-morrow my friends will fly up to the Second Cataract. The river-horse couches there among the bulrushes, and on a great granite throne sits the God Memnon. [end of 13] All night long he watches the stars, and when the morning star shines he utters one cry of joy, and then he is silent. At noon the yellow lions come down to the water's edge to drink. They have eyes like green beryls, and their roar is louder than the roar of the cataract."^{xvii}

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "far away across the city I see a young man in a garret. He is leaning over a desk covered with papers, and in a tumbler by his side there is a bunch of withered violets. His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as a pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes."^{xviii} He is trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre, but he is too cold to write any more. There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint."

"I will wait with you one night longer," said the Swallow, who really had a good heart. "Shall I

take him another ruby?" [end of 14]

"Alas! I have no ruby now," said the Prince; "my eyes are all that I have left. They are made of rare sapphires, which were brought out of India a thousand years ago. Pluck out one of them and take it to him. He will sell it to the jeweller, and buy food and firewood, and finish his play."

"Dear Prince," said the Swallow, "I cannot do that"; and he began to weep.

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "do as I command you."

So the Swallow plucked out the Prince's eye, and flew away to the student's garret. It was easy enough to get in, as there was a hole in the roof. Through this he darted, and came into the room. The young man had his head buried in his hands, so he did not hear the flutter of the bird's wings, and when he looked up he found the beautiful sapphire lying on the withered violets.

"I am beginning to be appreciated," he cried; "this is from some great admirer. [end of 15] Now I can finish my play," and he looked quite happy.

The next day the Swallow flew down to the harbour. He sat on the mast of a large vessel and watched the sailors hauling big chests out of the hold with ropes. "Heave a-hoy!" they shouted as each chest came up. "I am going to Egypt"! cried the Swallow, but nobody minded, and when the moon rose he flew back to the Happy Prince.

"I am come to bid you good-bye," he cried.

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "will you not stay with me one night longer?"

"It is winter," answered the Swallow, "and the chill snow will soon be here. In Egypt the sun is warm on the green palm-trees, and the crocodiles lie in the mud and look lazily about them. My companions are building a nest in the Temple [end of 16] of Baalbec, and the pink and white doves are watching them, and cooing to each other. Dear Prince, I must leave you, but I will never forget you, and next spring I will bring you back two beautiful jewels in place of those you have given away. The ruby shall be redder than a red rose, and the sapphire shall be as blue as the great sea."

"In the square below," said the Happy Prince, "there stands a little match-girl^{xix}. She has let her matches fall in the gutter, and they are all spoiled. Her father will beat her if she does not bring home some money, and she is crying. She has no shoes or stockings, and her little head is bare. Pluck out my other eye, and give it to her, and her father will not beat her."

"I will stay with you one night longer," said the Swallow, "but I cannot pluck out your eye. You would be quite blind then."

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "do as I command you." [end of 17]

So he plucked out the Prince's other eye, and darted down with it. He swooped past the match-girl, and slipped the jewel into the palm of her hand. "What a lovely bit of glass," cried the little girl; and she ran home, laughing.

Then the Swallow came back to the Prince. "You are blind now," he said, "so I will stay with you always."

"No, little Swallow," said the poor Prince, "you must go away to Egypt."

"I will stay with you always," said the Swallow, and he slept at the Prince's feet.

All the next day he sat on the Prince's shoulder, and told him stories of what he had seen in strange lands. He told him of the red ibises, who stand in long rows on the banks of the Nile, and catch gold-fish in their beaks; of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and lives in the desert, and knows everything; of the merchants, who walk slowly by the side of their camels, [end of 18] and carry amber beads in their hands; of the King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal; of the great green snake that sleeps in a palm-tree, and has twenty priests to feed it with honey-cakes; and of the pygmies who sail over a big lake on large flat leaves, and are always at war with the butterflies.

"Dear little Swallow," said the Prince, "you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery. ^{xx} Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there."

So the Swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep [end of 19] themselves warm. "How hungry we are!" they said. "You must not lie here," shouted the Watchman, and they wandered out into the rain.

Then he flew back and told the Prince what he had seen.

"I am covered with fine gold," said the Prince, "you must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy." ^{xxi}

Leaf after leaf of the fine gold the Swallow picked off, till the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey. Leaf after leaf of the fine gold he brought to the poor, and the children's faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street. "We have bread now!" they cried. ^{xxii}

Then the snow came, and after the snow came the frost. The streets looked as if they were made of silver, they were so bright and glistening; long icicles like crystal daggers hung down from the

eaves of the houses, [end of 20] everybody went about in furs, and the little boys wore scarlet caps and skated on the ice.

The poor little Swallow grew colder and colder, but he would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well. He picked up crumbs outside the baker's door when the baker was not looking and tried to keep himself warm by flapping his wings.

But at last he knew that he was going to die. He had just strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. "Good-bye, dear Prince!" he murmured, "will you let me kiss your hand?"

"I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow," said the Prince, "you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you."^{xxiii}

"It is not to Egypt that I am going," said the Swallow. "I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?" [end of 21]

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet.

At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two.^{xxiv} It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost.

Early the next morning the Mayor was walking in the square below in company with the Town Councillors. As they passed the column he looked up at the statue: "Dear me! how shabby the Happy Prince looks!" he said.

"How shabby indeed!" cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor; and they went up to look at it.

"The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer," said the Mayor in fact, "he is little better than a beggar!"

"Little better than a beggar," said the Town Councillors. [end of 22]

"And here is actually a dead bird at his feet!" continued the Mayor. "We must really issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here." And the Town Clerk made a note of the suggestion.

So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince. "As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful," said the Art Professor at the University.^{xxv}

Then they melted the statue in a furnace, and the Mayor held a meeting of the Corporation to decide what was to be done with the metal. "We must have another statue, of course," he said, "and it shall be a statue of myself."

"Of myself," said each of the Town Councillors, and they quarrelled. When I last heard of them they were quarrelling still.

"What a strange thing!" said the overseer of the workmen at the foundry. "This broken lead heart will not melt in the furnace. We must throw it away." So they threw it on a [end of 23] dust-heap where the dead Swallow was also lying.^{xxvi}

"Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

"You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me."^{xxvii}

Endnotes

ⁱ This double-edged observation evokes Wilde's later response to criticism of *The House of Pomegranates* (1891): "Now in building this *House of Pomegranates* I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public" (11 Dec. 1891 *Letters* 302). Wilde always deplored the flatness, pretension, and ugliness of the "malign bourgeoisie," as Killeen describes the speaker in this passage (*The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* 2007 25). The "sensible mother" and the Mathematical Master are cut of similar cloth.

ⁱⁱ Concerts at St. Paul's by the children who attended charity schools were held annually, and inspired tributes in music and poetry by Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), Hector Berlioz (1803-69), and William Blake (1757-1827). (Ian Spink, "Haydn at St Paul's: 1791 or 1792?" *Early Music* 33.2 [May 2005] 273-80). Killeen suggests that this passage, along with the others, exploits an "opposition . . . between English Protestant adult rationality and Irish Catholic childish imagination, between English materialism and Celtic idealism" (2007 33). In *De Profundis* Wilde writes of Jesus Christ, "His chief war was against the Philistines In their heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their entire preoccupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance, the Jews of Jerusalem in Christ's day were the exact counterpart of the British Philistine of our own" (*De Profundis and Other Writings*, 177)

ⁱⁱⁱ The Mathematical Master appears to be a Utilitarian with a dislike for the imagination. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) also criticized this positivistic attitude on the part of educators in his depiction of Gradgrind in *Hard Times* (1854).

^{iv} The Swallow may be connected with the Greek myth of Philomela and Procne (a story of two sisters transformed into a Nightingale and a Swallow respectively) through juxtaposition: the next story in the collection about the Nightingale, though "The Nightingale and the Rose" has greater resonance with the tale. (See Killeen 2007 44ff.)

^v "the swallow's courtship of the reed . . . echo[s] in a rather laboured way Wilde's later satire in both *Dorian Gray* and the society comedies on contemporary marriage customs. . . . [T]he journey eastward made by the swallow's friends makes use of imagery in Théophile Gautier's (1811-1872) poem "Ce que disent les hirondelles" [What the Swallows Say] in *Emaux et camées*" (Guy and Small 2006 171). Gautier's poem mentions "un temple, à Balbeck" (l. 30) and

"la seconde cataracte" (l. 45) as desirable nesting places.

^{vi} Like Hans Christian Andersen's (1805-75) use of personification to ironize the relation between physical ability and psychological desire (as in "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" [1838] a tale with numerous echoes in this story), Wilde here conflates the Reed's physical traits with volition. Their relationship is doomed because as rooted plant and migratory bird, their natures are fundamentally opposed. According to Isobel Murray, "there is no doubt that Wilde saturated himself in Andersen before producing *The Happy Prince*--and also *A House of Pomegranates*, although more and different impulses are at work there" ("Introduction," *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Oscar Wilde*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 10).

^{vii} The Swallow is drawn to the Prince first because of his beauty and only subsequently because of his goodness--an anticipation, perhaps, of the ideas in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891).

^{viii} The Swallow's selfish dismissal of the Reed's natural (and necessary) affinities contrasts with the relationship he soon develops with the Happy Prince. It also echoes the attitudes of the Miller and the Remarkable Rocket.

^{ix} The Palace of the Care Free; also, the name of an Irish mansion outside of Dublin in Booterstown (Killeen 2007 28).

^x Like that surrounding the house of the Selfish Giant, the wall sets a boundary between the happy and the unhappy.

^{xi} The Prince's lead heart contrasted with the "human heart" of flesh he once has inverts the reader's expectation of emotional capacity. Here, the lead heart is more receptive. Like the Tin Soldier of Andersen's story, he can feel even if his physical form prevents him from acting.

^{xii} The wages of seamstresses were notoriously poor, and many of the seamstresses in 1880s London were Irish (Killeen 2007 29).

^{xiii} Here, and in subsequent descriptions of Egypt, Wilde employs a "Decadent lexicon," emphasizing precious gems, exotic flowers, and curious gods and peoples (Guy and Small 2006 172); see for example the discussion in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she outlines the "commodity-based orientalism" of *Dorian Gray* in particular, and its function of "enabling a European community of gay mutual recognition and self-constitution" (1990 173-74). Worth considering is the relation between the Orientalism of the story, its references to Gautier, and its themes of alienation and estrangement between the protagonists and their bourgeois northern-European environments. (See Guy and Small 2006 172, in Killeen 2007 36, and a full discussion in Duffy 2001).

These descriptions were praised by Walter Pater in his letter to Wilde acknowledging receipt of the collection and his pleasure in it: "Your genuine 'little poems in prose,' those at the top of pages 10 and 14, for instance, are gems, and the whole, too brief, book abounds with delicate touches and pure English" (*The Letters of Oscar Wilde* 1962 p. 219 n. 2). Pater refers to the description of the mummified Egyptian king and that of the statue of Memnon, both Orientalist images.

^{xiv} True sons of "The Devoted Friend."

^{xv} The passion-flower perhaps evokes the pleasures of dalliance at court balls, but the flower is also named to reference the Passion of Jesus Christ, a connection that becomes clearer as the story progresses. In his Garden of Talking Flowers in *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis

Carroll decided against using the "Passion flower" for his crossiest character, instead choosing a Tiger-Lily (Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*. London: T. Fisher Unwin 1898, 150

xvi This mention locates the story in some sort of fictional pre-modern Mitteleuropa, and so de-ghettoising it – there were no Ghettos in Ireland.

xvii This description anticipates Wilde's use of a similar image in his 1894 poem, "The Sphinx": "Still from his chair of porphyry gaunt Memnon strains his lidless eyes / Across the empty land, and cries each yellow morning unto Thee" (*The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross, 1908, v. 9, 305; cited in Guy and Small 2006 171).

xviii As with other of Wilde's fairy tales, descriptions of young men's beauty are more erotically charged than those of young women.

xix Unlike H.C. Andersen's famous heroine, this child secures the necessary valuables to "return home, laughing" instead of dying of the cold to avoid a beating.

xx In *De Profundis* (1908), Wilde writes that "The Happy Prince" anticipates his own experience of deep sorrow and pain following great pleasure (*De Profundis* 83); "Clergymen and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation" (*De Profundis* 72). Yet in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), he writes that suffering in and of itself only degrades both the sufferer and him who helps to "prolong" the suffering through mis-placed charity (1891 274).

xxi "It is to be noted that Jesus never says that impoverished people are necessarily good, or wealthy people necessarily bad. That would not have been true. *There is only one class in the community that thinks more about money than the rich, and that is the poor*. The poor can think of nothing else. That is the misery of being poor" (*The Soul of Man Under Socialism* 289).

xxii What Christ does metaphorically in the Last Supper, the Prince does literally: breaking his body to give the people bread, as Jerome Griswold has noted ("Sacrifice and Mercy in Wilde's 'The Happy Prince.'" *Children's Literature* 3 [1974] 103-06; 106). Griswold's observations are extended by Killeen, 36.

xxiii An attack on the heteronormative expectation that true love's kiss must be between a man and a woman.

xxiv The realistic explanation for this "curious crack" anticipates the subsequent reactions of the City Councillors to the statue's denuded state, though the narration undercuts that explanation with its account of the true love between Prince and Swallow.

xxv A position in the late nineteenth-century debate about the relation between art and use. Wilde consistently argued for art's autonomy from matters of use--as he writes in the Preface to *"Dorian Gray,"* "All art is quite useless." (A contemporary who took the opposite position--that of the Professor--was William Morris, "who argued forcefully for a necessary connection between utility and beauty" (Guy and Small 2006 171).

xxvi Contrasting with the unrequited love of Andersen's "Steadfast Tin Soldier, the Happy Prince's love for the Swallow is more than requited. Both stories, however, end with the disposition of a leaden heart that expresses the value of love. But whereas the Tin Soldier's heart goes out with the rest of the ashly rubbish, the Happy Prince's goes to heaven.

xxvii God's proclamation recalls Christ's pronouncement on the cross to the believing thief that "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23.43, AV).

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